

Sermon for April 11, 2021— “Living As We Believe”

Second Sunday after Easter, Year B—Texts: Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

How many times have we missed out on something extraordinary?

You know, one of those memorable moments when you met up with some friends and they say, “Oh you just missed it” or “You should’ve been there.” The late Pittsburgh Pirates announcer Bob Prince knew all about this. While broadcasting the 1960 World Series, Prince missed one of the greatest moments in baseball history, Bill Mazeroski’s Game Seven home run that gave Pirates their first championship in 35 years.

In the top of the ninth inning., with the Pirates ahead 9-7, Prince headed to the clubhouse to get ready for post-game interviews. The Yankees, however, tied it in the top of ninth. So, Prince heads back to the booth. He’d just stepped off the Forbes Field elevator, when he heard a roar. It was the crowd responding to the game-winning home run. He actually conducted the post-game interviews, without having a clue about what’d happened. He learned about it hours later, when his wife told him.

Which brings us to Thomas.

Poor Thomas was the guy who missed the visit from the risen Jesus that first Easter evening. Why? No one knows for sure. All we know is that he was somewhere else. Jesus appears to the disciples entering the upper room through locked doors and Thomas was not there. It was that point in the story, post crucifixion, where we found the disciples wondering what to do next. Grieving. Fearful. Confused. Hiding away in an upper room, with none of the confidence and reignited hope that would come on Pentecost.

What we have is this wonderfully human account of Thomas, full of doubt and wanting evidence of his friends unbelievable claims. There’s a real sense that he needs to catch up and understand. The one thing that Thomas **does** know is that their encounter with Jesus has changed them. Here’s Thomas full of incredulity, wanting to see for himself in order to believe. Generally, our rational minds want evidence to get to the truth., rather than the claims of others. Show me the proof. Show me the money—right?

I was reading recently that evolutionary psychologists have argued that the human brain is designed to distrust, as a matter of survival. It certainly doesn’t help that so many of us have been lied to for so long, in so many ways, that we’ve become cynical to the point where a lot of people, including, at times, me, often have difficulty trusting in anything or in anyone, including God. And that same kind of hard-wiring that leads to distrust, also provides us, once we’ve accepted a belief, with a host of cognitive mechanisms designed to bias us against rejecting it.

There was a study done at Stanford a few years back, where psychologists presented students with a careful balance of scientific evidence for and against the benefits of capital punishment. Upon hearing all the evidence not one of the students changed their belief. As a matter of fact, each side’s was even more convinced about their respective beliefs. Sadly, the same is true when it comes to God and our own personal faith.

As I think we all realize, there's always been room for a healthy dose of doubt and a bit of wrestling all throughout our journeys of faith. Think about it: the name Israel literally means "wrestles with God."

Graham Ward, Divinity Professor at Oxford University, has spent many years exploring the question: What makes faith believable? He suggests that it's not just a cognitive exercise about knowledge and reasoning. Assembling evidence will always be subject to human manufacturing, bias and prejudgments.

Ward suggests that belief is also shaped by the way we perceive things through the lenses of, in no particular order: our hopes, cultural traditions and, as was the case with the Thomas, our suspicions. Belief appeals to the views and understanding of the larger collective, that is—a group with which we associate and which helps provide our identity. This would include things like: family, school, church, ethnic group, political group/party and so on. And it will be evidenced, and this is crucial, in the ways in which we choose to live out our belief(s) and embody them in our actions.

So, when we look at this morning's readings, chosen as a part of our faith tradition and set out in what's known as the Revised Common Lectionary, we encounter more than just words on the page. We know the incredible impact that the resurrection had on those who testified to it. In the account in Acts this morning, we discover a radical change in the behavior of Christ's followers and the development of a flourishing community. We see an infused heart and soul, in unity of purpose. We see a group of people living generously, sacrificially, in the bonds of love.

From other accounts, we know that what began as a community that ran away and hid themselves and huddled together behind locked doors become something else. Something incredible. Something that the world hadn't really seen before. With—as I alluded to earlier—a little help from the Holy Spirit, they became people who spoke with a newfound authority and power, braving hostility, to proclaim the message and teaching of their risen Lord. History confirms that the Christian faith caught like wildfire and spread to the ends of the earth. And Thomas the doubter, in his encounter with the risen Lord, moves from disbelief to the confession, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus goes on to say to him and to the generations to follow, "Blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet have come to believe."

So what might convince the doubters? What—for that matter—convinces us? What is it that makes faith believable? I'm of the opinion that it's less about what we hear and more about what we see—the transformation we witness in people's lives, the love and light that shines through the actions of others. The early Church took hold and grew because of the authentic witness of those first disciples.

I'd say we could use some of that now. But—what do I mean by authentic witness? Simply stated it's a consistency between what we say and what we do. It's about the things we do on Sunday finding their way into our lives the rest of the week. In recent years, there's been much discussion about the future of the church. Whatever it is, one thing's for sure: if the method doesn't match the message, people will stop listening.

On Maundy Thursday, after washing the disciples feet, Jesus gave them—and us—a new commandment. “Love one another,” he said. “Just as I have loved you, also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples; if you have love for one another.”

The earliest Christians were known as “The People of the Way” because of the way they lived, taking seriously the words of the one who was—and is—“the way, the truth and the life.” They also showed it in the way they died, doing so fearlessly, for the sake of Christ, praying for those who persecuted them. In doing so they owned an authenticity and authority that compelled them to proclaim the power of Christ, crucified, risen and alive.

We see this in the world today. Every day, thirteen Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith; twelve churches or Christian buildings are attacked and twelve Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, while another five are abducted.

Every. Single. Day.

This is according to the 2021 World Watch List annual report produced by Open Doors, a non-profit organization that chronicles persecution against Christians, guides prayers and reminds persecuted believers that they are not forgotten. In this report, released in January of this year, David Curry, President/CEO of Open Doors USA, said that, “the numbers of God’s people who are suffering should mean the Church is dying, that Christians are keeping quiet, losing their faith.” But he continued with a quote from the prophet Isaiah, “that’s not what’s happening, as they make their way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

We see it in the resolve of a young Nigerian woman by the name of Liya Sharibu. Liya was taken at the age of fourteen by Boko Haram, on Feb. 19, 2018, one of 109 students abducted in the Chibok kidnappings. It’s believed that she’s still being held because she refuses to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ. It challenges us in our own witness to the resurrection. And you know what? It should.

In a country where we not only have the freedom to worship and believe, but are **guaranteed** that freedom, how dare we take that for granted? How can we **possibly** choose to live our lives in any way that fails to give thanks and praise to God for the rich and abundant ways in which we’ve been blessed?

So, what do people see when they see us? Do others see something worth believing?

A great story comes out of communist Russia. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a powerful member of the Politburo of the Soviet Union. He was the editor of the national newspaper, Pravda, and a soldier in the Bolshevik Revolution that forced communism on Russia in 1917. In 1930, he travelled to the city of Kiev to address a huge assembly of workers. His topic was atheism. For over an hour he hurled insult and ridicule, argued against Christianity and against God. He finished and smiled to himself, believing that he’d left the crowd’s faith in smoldering ashes. “Are there any questions?” Bukharin demanded.

A solitary man rose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the Bukharin. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man looked at those who’d gathered. At last he shouted the ancient Orthodox greeting, “Христос воскрес,”

pronounced “Chris-TOS vas-KRES,” which means “Christ is risen!” The vast assembly arose and shouted in response, “Воистину воскрес,” pronounced “Vah-IST-in-oo vas-KRES” or “He is risen indeed!”

Surely that is the key truth of Easter, that Jesus is risen, that He is risen indeed. If this is so—and it most certainly is—then here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: It ought to affect us in some way. It should challenge our ways of thinking, doing, living.

So, does it?

What do I mean? Well, what I mean is, does our faith make any kind of **real** difference in our lives? Do we live as we believe? Does our faith **inform** our everyday lives or is it only something we do for about an hour on Sunday morning? What role does the risen Christ really and truly play in our lives? Does it **matter**? These are serious questions that deserve honest answers, prayerfully considered.

Let me say it this way: individually and as a church, God has given us the ability and the opportunity to shine his light among his people. And what greater purpose can our lives have than to serve the Creator of all that is, the King of the universe and of this world, the one who made us and the one who first loved us. And as far as whether faith matters—of course it does! Archbishop Charles J. Chaput wrote,

“Faith matters because hope and love can’t bear the weight of the suffering in the world without it. Faith matters because it reminds us that there’s good in the world and meaning to every life. And that the things that make us human are worth fighting for. Faith matters because it drives us to do what’s right...”

I want to end with a poem I ran across recently. It was written from Fr. James Schmitmeyer. He invites us to think about how we witness to the resurrection through our own stories.

Ask anyone who’s ever shoved aside the rock of life
and uncovered the light of God
They’ll tell you a story
About the power of hope
the power of faith
the power of love.

A story about transformation
A story about what it’s like
to die of suburban boredom
or body addiction or emotional dismay
only to be born again
be new again
live life again.
A resurrected life
An eternal, never-ending life.
All because of Christ.

Hear their stories and think of your own.
The event that changed you.
The influence that formed you.
The sacraments that save you.

Because, somehow, somehow
you too have brushed up against Christ
and, somehow, learned the truth about God.
Somehow, some way
Christ has called your name.

You've seen his face.
You've heard his voice.
Alleluia Christ is Risen!

Thanks be to God, he is Risen indeed!
Amen and amen.